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Good Morning.

I want to welcome you to this abbreviated annual gathering of the National Rifle Association. Thank you for coming and thank you for supporting your organization. I also want to applaud your courage in coming here today. Of course, you have a right to be here.

As you know, we've canceled the festivities and fellowship we normally enjoy at our annual gatherings. This decision has perplexed a few and inconvenienced thousands. I apologize for that. But it's fitting and proper that we should do this, because NRA members are, above all, Americans. That means whatever our differences, we are respectful of one another and we stand united, especially in adversity

Wellington Webb, the mayor of Denver, sent me a message: "Don't come here. We don't want you here."

I say to the Mayor: I volunteered for the war they wanted me to attend when I was 18 years old. Since then, I've run small errands for my country from Nigeria to Vietnam. I know many of you could say the same. But the Mayor said, "Don't come."

I'm sorry for that. I'm sorry for the newspaper ads saying the same thing. "Don't come here." This is our country. As Americans, we are free to travel wherever we wish in our broad land.

They say we'll create a media distraction. But we were preceded here by hundreds of intrusive news crews.

They say we'll create political distraction. But it has not been the NRA pressing for political advantage, calling press conferences to propose vast packages of new legislation.

They say, "Don't come here." I guess what saddens me most is how it suggests complicity. It implies that you and I and 80-million honest gun owners are somehow to

blame; that we don't care as much as they, or that we don't deserve to be as shocked and horrified as every other soul in America mourning for the people of Littleton.

"Don't come here." That's offensive. It's also absurd, because we live here.

There are thousands of NRA members in Denver and tens upon tens of thousands in the state of Colorado. NRA members labor in Denver's factories, populate Denver's faculties, run Denver corporations, play on Colorado sports teams, work in media across the front range, parent and teach and coach Denver's children, attend Denver's churches, and proudly represent Denver in uniform on the world's oceans and in the skies over Kosovo at this very moment.

NRA members are in City Hall, Fort Carson, NORAD, the Air Force Academy and the Olympic Training Center. And yes, NRA members are surely among the police and fire and SWAT team heroes who risked their lives to rescue the students of Columbine from evil, mindless executioners.

"Don't come here?" We are *already* here. This community is our home. Every community in America is our home. We are a 128-year-old fixture of mainstream America. The Second Amendment ethic of lawful, responsible firearm ownership spans the broadest cross-section of American life imaginable.

So we have the same right as all other citizens to be here: to help shoulder the grief; to share our sorrow; to offer our respectful, reasoned voice to the national discourse that has erupted around this tragedy

One more thing: our words and our behavior will be scrutinized more than ever this morning. Those who are hostile toward us will lie in wait to seize on a sound-byte out of context, ever searching for an embarrassing moment to ridicule us. So let us be mindful... the eyes of the nation are upon us today.